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ABSTRACT

An increasing percentage of weddings today are remarriages. The urgent need for counseling in preparation for, and in the context of, remarriage deserves recognition. Yet remarriage counseling is a neglected topic at professional conventions, in research studies and among marriage and family counselors. This kind of marital relationship exhibits a unique blend of common and novel elements. Commonalities between first marriages and remarriages are obvious--for example, both may involve the interpersonal dynamics of the nuclear family. Parallels can also be drawn such as the finding that in-law problems are outnumbered by "step" and ex-spouse dilemmas. Additionally, couples in a remarriage have publicly faced relationship failure and wounds are slow to heal, and new adult-child relationships are frequently strained. However, remarried couples can bring greater self-knowledge and maturity to the new union. They may be far happier than couples in a first marriage; they may also become recidivists. The difference could lie with the perceptive marriage and family counselor who is aware of issues and sensitive to dynamics in remarriage. (Author)

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REMARRIAGE COUNSELING - A CURRENT CHALLENGE

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Remarriage might be called a brighter side of divorce because it represents reaffirmation of marriage under hopeful circumstances. Whether this hope is again disappointed may depend on the support afforded the marriage. The rate of divorce is soaring, with the rate of remarriage close behind. Because of the unique nature of some of the adjustments required, counseling prior to and in the context of remarriage would be invaluable. However, the topic of remarriage counseling is neglected in research, at conferences and by marriage and family counselors who are relatively unaware of an expanding potential clientele. Since there has been almost no self-conscious practice of remarriage counseling,¹ this paper is theoretical. It presents some of the important issues a model of remarriage counseling might recognize.

Between 1900 and today our life span has increased 50%; our potential marriage span, however, has doubled. The possibility of a fiftieth anniversary is as legitimate an expectation as the twenty-fifth anniversary was at the turn of the century. Divorce has stepped in at the child-launching period, where death brought termination to marriage previously. The result is a bimodal divorce curve, peaking at the time of the first child's birth and the last child's leaving home. Divorce has doubled in the past ten years. However, four out of five divorced persons remarry and they constitute 20% of those for whom the wedding bells toll.

The Challenge

It has long been common for a person on the brink of divorce to turn too late to a marriage counselor, only to end up seeing a lawyer.

Predivorce planfulness is relatively new. Marcia Lasswell (1976) finds an increasing number of her counselee couples prepare for divorce well in advance. They feel divorce can be delayed till certain vocational, educational, or parental objectives are met, and they seek counsel in making the necessary adjustments beforehand. The emotional pain of separation and the dissolution process draws many clients into therapy. Following divorce, they may continue counseling, learning to know themselves and other persons, and learning to relate interpersonally. Post-divorce counseling is a specialty for an increasing number of therapists.

In sum, people come for counseling prior to divorce in hope that they can save their marriage or to preplan divorce; they come, driven by anxiety and pain, during the process of separation and divorce; and they come after divorce, the critical period of reestablishment as individuals. There is a drop off at this point. Neither therapists nor clients seem to think explicitly of counseling toward remarriage, nor of counseling specifically focused on remarriage when that has occurred. (Perhaps the educational model advocated by Messinger (1976), while valuable in itself, might also set the stage for remarriage therapy.²⁾

Issues in Remarriage

Remarriage represents a unique blend of common and new elements when compared to first marriage. Among these are commonalities, parallels and differences. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Commonalities

Remarriage relationships are marital relationships and usually parental relationships. However, disturbances that could occur also in first marriages are sometimes blamed on divorce or remarriage. This

encourages negative perceptions and pathology, and delays early resolution of difficulties. In the marital relationship, misinterpretation of problems and fear of "another failure" can create an unhappy climate. In the parental relationship, children may play on their "rejection," using the guilt of the parent to win overpermissive treatment. The normal rebellion of teenagers may be interpreted as the result of remarriage rather than an expected parent-child relationship. It is important to realize that "Step relations . . . are every family's relations magnified and exaggerated . . ." (Simon, 1964, p. 18).

Parallels Between Marriage and Remarriage.

The concept of parallels can be most clearly illustrated by examining the impact of outsiders on the relationship. Family, inlaws and friends may be assets or liabilities in any marriage; in remarriage, the ex-spouse and ex-inlaws provide added impact. According to Duberman (1976, p. 96), in remarriage 40% of the persons involved feel they do not receive positive support from their own relatives. Young couples in a first marriage don't experience such a high percentage of neutral or negative reaction from their families. Inlaws, of course, are even more critical of their son's or daughter's ex-spouse when divorce occurs, and the new mate in the event of remarriage. However, children have the right to see grandparents even though a stepparent may recognize that they may try to turn the children against him or her. Friends can feel relief that a "gay divorcee" has been tied down or genuine joy in their friend's new happiness. One thing is certain: the second marriage comes under closer inspection from all these outsiders than a first marriage, and signs of stress are quickly noted. The ex-spouse can create many problems. Attitudes can range from indifference to hostility. The finality of remarriage can trigger a

reaction in the ex-spouse and children of the first union. Fantasies of a reunited family vanish with a new marriage. The wife and ex-wife are most likely to experience rivalry (Simon, 1964, p. 191). Perhaps the traditional priority women have given marriage explains this even in our more "liberated" society. An ex-wife's emotions may exacerbate those of her children when they are especially vulnerable. Their insecurity, jealousy and hostility may be increased as they side with their mother against father and his new wife. An ex-husband's emotions are commonly expressed through money; support may be delayed, or the children's affections "bought" with gifts and excursions. There are a multitude of ways a father can create problems by even slight abuse of legal financial commitment.

Differences Between Marriage and Remarriage

One of the most important differences lies in society's attitude toward remarriage or the reconstituted family; both are categorized as deviant (Duberman, 1976, pp. 3-8). The language of criminal law, for example, is found in terms such as "custody" and "visitation rights." Actually no families are more desirous of approximating the norms of the ideal nuclear family than are reconstituted families. There is usually a self-conscious effort to establish solidarity in the face of uncertainty and undefined roles and obligations.

For the couple, problematical differences between first and second marriages may involve a need to overcome a sense of failure affecting self-concept and competence in relationships. One problem lies in the possibility of another breakup. Divorced persons cannot be certain that they will not be among the recidivists. Anxiety mounts with recognition that remarriage uncovers persisting negative patterns in oneself. If these

contributed to the termination of one marriage, might it happen again? Remarriage is far more complex than first marriage in respect to: children; finances; problems with families of origin, inlaw families and families broken by divorce. Look at the financial situation, for example. Money is involved from beyond the home both for receiver, giver and new spouse. A former wife, receiving alimony and/or child support, receives money from someone with whom her partnership is "terminated." The former husband in this situation may have little or no influence over the children he supports; he gives money to a woman whom he cares for no longer. The new wife sees money go beyond her home to a woman who may undermine her and to children who regard her as an intrusive and even cruel stepmother. A new husband sees money coming to the children he is seeking to relate to from another man--the one who fathered them and who retains a powerful hold on their lives.

On the positive side for a remarried couple, there are several advantages over a first marriage. Counseling has often been undertaken so formerly married persons are frequently more open people. They are likely to have come to terms with themselves and others as they really are and they are seeking more positive relationships. Maturity and self-knowledge are assets to bring to any relationship. Expectations are more realistic and may be laid out as groundrules in remarriage. Such expectations are easier to understand and fulfill. Remarried couples frequently feel they are lucky with less than they might have considered necessary in a first marriage.

Children--A Major Area of Adjustment

The presence of children compounds the complexity of remarriage sufficiently to warrant additional comment. Each "parent" involved in remarriage may have divergent opinions on childrearing and certainly in perspectives. The live-with parent tends to have the bread-and-butter relationship, bearing heavy responsibility, but carrying the child's

loyalty; the visit-with parent tends to be in a "dating" relationship with the child, seeing him on special occasions, carrying less responsibility (except perhaps financial) and finding fewer rewards in the parent-child relationship. Divorce has ruptured a family as well as a marriage; the stepparent is the intruder on the scene, facing undefined role relationships under a burden of negative stereotypes.

The counselor should be alert to the negative aspects of the role of stepmother in particular. The Cinderella story has been universally found. Three hundred forty-five of these folktales were examined by Cox (1893) and common components drawn out. These basically were: the lost (dead) mother; the helpless father; the jealous, wicked stepmother and the beautiful pure young girl she persecutes. In the course of the story, the girl finds salvation and revenge through the power of the dead mother (or some other agent); she remains unsullied, while witnessing the destruction of her hated rival and frequently also of her stepsister(s), recipients of favored treatment and echoes of the stepmother's hatred. There are no wicked stepchild stories, though many a second wife would like to write one! The stepfather in most cultures has little to do with child-rearing; there are no tales of his cruelty.

The child, in the event of remarriage, is confronted with tremendous adjustments: the bulldozer techniques of the new parent, desperate to please; peers' tales of stepparent meanness; negative messages of grandparents; and the tearing experience of dual relationships (one cannot like the new parent and still be "loyal" to the natural parent of the same sex). Adjustment can involve two new parents and two sets of step-sibs (as well as miscellaneous relatives) if both parents remarry. The sense of loss of love experienced prior to and during the divorce process comes flooding back. One child expressed it to her stepmother: "You took half of Daddy's love,

I have to share the other half with my brother." The focus of the problem for the stepparent is found in the childish weapon: "You're not my mother/father!" Rivalry and hostility are basic problems in the reconstituted family and it may take multiple forms. Resolution requires caring and hard work on the part of all--and a lot of "growing up."

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented the need for remarriage counseling prior to and in the context of remarriage. The commonalities, parallels and differences (as compared with issues involved in first marriages) were outlined and the complexity children introduce to the situation was described. The remarriage situation poses challenging problems for the marriage/family counselor. However, looking at the optimistic side of remarriage and reconstituted families: couples in these situations have an attitude of hope. They believe in marriage and the family. They believe in change, and in change which improves the situation; in addition, they recognize the need for work. This makes them excellent potential clients for marriage and family counseling. The difference between recidivism and greater happiness in a remarriage could lie with the perceptive marriage counselor, who is aware of the issues outlined above and who is sensitive to the unique dynamics of remarriage.

Footnotes

¹After presentation of this paper, the author was alerted to an incisive article by Messinger (1976) which proposed a course in remarriage preparation.

²The sentence in parentheses was added following presentation of this paper. Reading of Messinger's (1976) article prompted the idea that an educational approach might provide a bridge to remarriage counseling.

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